

10.31.22

By Electronic mail (WeWill@cityofchicago.org)

City of Chicago Office of the Mayor
121 North La Salle Street
Chicago, IL 60602

To Whom It May Concern:

We write on behalf of the Chicago Housing Choice Voucher Participant Leader Board (HCV Leader Board), facilitated by the Chicago Area Fair Housing Alliance (CAFHA) regarding the City of Chicago's draft We Will Chicago comprehensive plan. The HCV Leader Board is made up of Chicago voucher holders and advocates for fair housing rights. CAFHA is a consortium of community leaders, housing advocates, nonprofit professionals and government representatives working to advance housing justice through advocacy and collaborative action.

The HCV Leader Board and CAFHA together participated in the We Will Chicago planning process by serving as a community grantee collecting input on the plan and as an advisor on the Housing and Neighborhoods Pillar Team. Throughout the over year-long planning process, the HCV Leader Board discussed, honed, and refined our recommendations for what Chicago can do to make the City a more welcoming place to housing choice voucher holders. Chicago's over 40,000 households utilizing vouchers face some of the greatest threats of discrimination, housing instability, and displacement; therefore, it is critical that the voices of voucher holders are represented within this plan.

While initially, we operated under the assumption that our input would influence what, in the City's own pre-planning process with Metropolitan Planning Council documented as a best practice: "a plan with clearly-defined metrics, recommendations paired with identified budgets and resources, review cycles, and the ability to implement in tandem with neighborhood-specific plans."¹ We are now disappointed to see that the action-oriented components of the plan have been siphoned off into a separate document called "Policy Ideas" that will NOT be included in the final plan. The Policy Ideas document best reflects the input we provided in the plan, and is also the only tangible, measurable, path to achieving the broad equity related goals contained in We Will. While the We Will framework contains well-intentioned aspirations for the City, this is simply not a plan until there is a clear roadmap for how the City will achieve those aspirations. Particularly important to community members are measurable benchmarks that we can use to hold our leaders accountable, without which, the plan is just words on paper.

Talking about these deeply personal issues is not easy nor comfortable, but we participated in the planning process in good faith as volunteers giving of our time and expertise in an effort to make things better for other voucher holders. We've done our part, now we call on the City to do yours. Take our input and recommendations and turn them into action. Below is an outline of the recommendations we shared with the City throughout the planning process as well as the policy ideas that best reflect our recommendations. We urge you to include these priorities in the final We Will Chicago Plan.

¹ https://www.metroplanning.org/uploads/cms/documents/peerworkshops_wewillchicago_appendix_new.pdf

HCV Leader Board Recommendations & We Will Policy Ideas

Addressing discrimination: The City and CHA need to work together to aggressively target housing providers with an education and enforcement campaign on fair housing and other relevant laws and responsibilities and launch a public campaign to signal to landlords that the city takes a hardline stance against illegal discrimination in all its forms.

- **We Will Policy Priority: 1.3.B (Housing):** Ensure housing choice voucher holders can obtain housing by partnering with Chicago Housing Authority to educate housing providers, including providing technology upgrades, and increasing enforcement against discrimination.

Housing conditions issues: Housing inspections are not catching health hazards. The power imbalance with landlords means landlords can threaten displacement or retaliate for making conditions issues complaints. Because landlords hold a disproportionate amount of power in the landlord/tenant relationship, particularly for voucher holders, voucher holders feel inhibited from reporting issues for fear of losing their homes, and with the lack of alternative housing options available due to discrimination, discrepancies in market cost and voucher value, and other factors, losing one's homes could mean losing long term housing stability. The City must invest in better and proactive inspections for health and safety standards, better renter rights and protections against retaliation and displacement, and greater instruction and resources to landlords to follow and abide by renter protections, including the RLTO.

- **We Will Policy Priorities:**
 - 1.1.C (Housing): Establish and adequately resource predictive and proactive residential inspection programs using data from 311 calls, utility and property tax delinquencies, and other indicators to prevent housing from going into a state of disrepair, so that residents are protected from environmental health hazards and small housing owners are supported in making necessary upgrades.
 - 2.3.C (Housing): Enact eviction protections to protect marginalized tenants from eviction without cause, especially Black and Latino tenants, who are at the highest risk of eviction
 - 2.3.D (Housing): Permanently increase resources for tenant supports, such as through an Office of Tenant Advocate or similar structure, to provide early assistance, and also legal aid through universal right to counsel or a dedicated City department providing legal counsel.

Decision making power, accountability, and transparency: voucher holders do not have a say in the decisions that impact them. Unlike public housing residents, voucher holders do not have a formal outlet within the CHA to take part in the decision making. There have been several attempts throughout the years to create a forum for voucher holders to formally advise the CHA but these attempts have failed largely due to a lack of commitment, resources, and follow through from the CHA. Voucher holders need a seat at the table in influencing policies. Additionally, at the community level, certain wards have a better process for including community in decision making than others- all wards should have the same process for community participation in decision making. The City Council approves of the CHA Board, they should set standards for the dedication of seats for voucher holders. Additionally, there should be a more democratic election process with voucher holders involved in selected who represents them on the board. The CHA should also regularly report to the City Council and the City Council needs more oversight not just over the board but the actions and policies of the CHA. At the ward level, there needs to be more accountability to the community for how aldermen spend funds (aldermanic menu program) and where public dollars are allocated.

- **We Will Policy Priorities:**
 - 2.2E (Community Engagement): Work with City departments and sister agencies to ensure and track that underrepresented residents and/or identities are included in decision making boards, like public commissions and governing boards (e.g. Housing Choice Voucher holders on CHA Board)

- 5.1.C (Community Engagement): Explore alternative structures to equitably include neighborhood representatives in decision making processes. (i.e., Ward-based Community Development Advisory Councils, community tables, remapping processes, etc.).

Greater support and resources, especially for people with disabilities: voucher holders face stigmatization by PHA staff, contractors, and housing providers. Voucher holders struggle to obtain assistance and resources when seeking help from service providers and the PHAs. All community members with disabilities struggle to get the supports they need in the community. Neighborhood supports are critical- like health and mental health clinics, job training, also address the fact that certain areas of the city are not accessible for people with disabilities- sidewalks, transportation, etc. Improve bus affordability, access and frequency. Improved bus routing-from lower-income neighborhoods to health clinics and supermarkets, e.g. –would provide primary (preventative and non-urgent care) and secondary health benefits, such as expanded access to healthy nutrition. Subsidizing bus fares for neediest residents is also vital. There are several existing options; expanding these is vital to improving health outcomes. Mobile Care Clinics. Mobile clinics offer mental health support, reproductive health care, and primary-care services. Specifically for people with disabilities: Better one-to-one support and perhaps a help line for issues, city and CHA staff need to be educated in disability rights, and experienced providing housing services to persons with disabilities.

- **We Will Policy Priorities:**

- 1.3.C (Housing): Develop centralized, user-friendly public database and waitlist for publicly-funded affordable housing units, including units that are accessible to people with disabilities
- 1.4.B (Housing): Expand funding for lower-income renters and homeowners to make accessibility improvements to their units when needed.
- 1.4.D (Housing): Audit existing publicly-funded affordable housing and homeless shelters to evaluate accessibility and develop funding streams to assist with rehabilitation.
- Goal 1.1.C (Transportation): Formalize a program of data metrics and performance standards for use by all City departments, wards, and partner agencies to evaluate, implement, and monitor transportation and infrastructure projects prioritizing equity, safety, accessibility, and sustainability
- 3.5.C (Housing): Ensure every community has accessible, safe and activated spaces to gather, including parks, community centers, libraries, youth centers, artist hubs, and health centers
- 3.2.B (Health): Fund and support the establishment of health-centered community centers in high-need neighborhoods to link people to health-supporting government and community programs
- 2.3.A (Transportation) Work with the RTA, CTA, Pace, Metra, CMAP, and City Departments to develop and implement programs expanding transit access and affordability to more Chicagoans through coordination of projects, fare initiatives, schedules, and transfers

Homeownership: The City must work with the CHA to enhance, improve, and promote the CHA's Choose to Own Program for voucher holders. This can be accomplished through better and more accessible educational materials, better partnerships such as with Community Land Trusts, and public/private partnerships, need one-on-one navigators or mentors to help new HCV homeowners through the process.

- **We Will Policy Priorities:**

- 2.1.D (Housing): Support innovative models of homeownership such as limited equity housing cooperatives, community land trusts and the Chicago Housing Authority's Choose to Own program through subsidies, technical assistance and partnerships.

Supportive Housing: Need to expand supportive housing programs for those most in need. Housing for the

homeless, those with health and mental health needs, and others at higher risk of housing instability. Investing in rapid rehousing and case managers is key. One-on-one support through Housing Navigators is also essential. Also, expand low rate, single room rental housing. This can be done through City/state subsidies to refurbish homes, old motels or other unused buildings would create single rooms for rent at low rates.

- **We Will Policy Priorities:**

- 1.3F (Housing): Build on the Single Room Occupancy (SRO) Preservation Ordinance and the 2022 SRO Loan Fund to preserve and rehabilitate SRO units, which are a critical housing option for low-income residents

We appreciate the opportunity to comment on the We Will Chicago plan and are available to offer further information.

Thank you,

Chicago Housing Choice Voucher Participant Leader Board and the Chicago Area Fair Housing Alliance

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